

Lifestyle Migration and a Burst Utopia in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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Abstract:

In her second novel The Lowland (2013), Jhumpa Lahiri displays Gauri, a young girl who lived in Calcutta in the nineteen seventies and was enamoured by Udayan and his revolutionary ideas. She marries him and is shocked to live through the terrible reality of being a Naxalite's wife. After Udayan's violent death, a pregnant Gauri is subject to the torture of widowhood in his oppressive household. Udayan's brother Subhash comes down to India from Rhode Island to meet his family and mourn his dead brother. He offers to marry his brother's young widow and marries her against the wishes of his parents. Gauri grabs at the opportunity to escape the unending darkness of religious and gender repression to a world of intellectual promise and freedom. Deciding to exile herself from her homeland and settle in Rhode Island with a complete stranger, Gauri rejects her ties with family and homeland. She motivates herself to forget all the painful emotional conflicts and dilemmas involving her past and to detach herself from emotional ties even with her daughter. This article argues that Gauri's forgetting emerges from a grammar of protest built around her traumatic experiences in her homeland. The narrative grammar of protest is embedded in Gauri's refusing to talk about her past, her detachment with her husband Subhash and her daughter, Bela, her complete immersion in an intellectual life and also her self-motivated second exile from Rhode Island to California in order to become free and independent. Her refusal to assimilate into the Indian diaspora, refusal to return, and her self-inflicted exile and detachment is not dominated by the sentiment of loss or a tragic event,

rather by an opportunity for intellectual and psychological independence.

Key words: Lifestyle migration, Forgetting, religious repression, exile

Introduction:

Seeking and getting a better life is a cultural Utopia every individual aspires towards. Particularly, if one is repressed, is a victim lacking opportunity to grow or is conscious of self and identity. Meanings of life, dreams and aspirations inspire 'individual migration trajectory, the impetus supplied by personal tragedy or simply the dread of more of the same, and the inspiration provided by specific landscapes' (O'Reilly 1). Pursuit of a good life socially, economically and politically becomes the impetus for people to migrate into other countries. The conditions are at times so extreme that they chose exile upon themselves and sever links with the parent society and culture. Jhumpa Lahiri, a writer of the Indian Diaspora in Canada, herself a second generation Indian in Canada is an offspring of aspiring parents who chose to migrate to Canada to get a better life for themselves and their future generations. Her fiction are a kaleidoscope of conflicts of the characters that have migrated from India to the West seeking an utopia and trying to forget the cultural absolutes of their country of birth. Lahiri's second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), is a polyvocal narrative of active choice for becoming an exile in the quest for self and identity. The narrative draws into focus three characters, Subhash, Gauri and Bela, who sever themselves from filial and societal ties, forgetting cultural responsibilities in order to attain a better life and reveal an underlying grammar of protest against the system of repression. This article shall attempt to focus on Gauri and analyse her double exile in search of a free and independent self as a lifestyle

migrant. It shall draw upon certain theories of culture, motivated forgetting and exile to argue and analyse Gauri's journey towards her chosen space.

The Lowland displays Gauri, a young girl who lived in Calcutta in the nineteen seventies and was enamoured by Udayan and his revolutionary ideas. She marries him and is shocked to live through the terrible reality of being a Naxalite's wife. After Udayan's violent death, a pregnant Gauri is subject to the torture of widowhood in his oppressive household. Udayan's brother Subhash comes down to India from Rhode Island to meet his family and mourn his dead brother. He offers to marry his brother's young widow and marries her against the wishes of his parents. Gauri grabs at the opportunity to escape the unending darkness of religious and gender repression to a world of intellectual promise and freedom. Deciding to exile herself from her homeland and settle in Rhode Island with a complete stranger, Gauri rejects her ties with family and homeland. She motivates herself to forget all the painful emotional conflicts and dilemmas involving her past and to detach herself from emotional ties even with her daughter. This article argues that Gauri's forgetting is motivated and emerges from a grammar of protest built around her traumatic experiences in her homeland. The narrative grammar of protest is embedded in Gauri's refusing to talk about her past, her detachment with her husband Subhash and her daughter, Bela, her complete immersion in an intellectual life and also her self-motivated second exile from Rhode Island to California in order to become free and independent.

Towards Utopia and Severance:

Gauri's desire and motivation to escape into an intellectually independent space is motivated by the culture of her homeland that she finds repressive and a threat to her social identity. Born and brought up in West Bengal in India, Gauri is obliged

to follow conventions of the Bengali family she has married into. After marrying Udayan she moves with him into his family home in Tollygunge, in Calcutta, where she lives with his parents. She assumes the role of a docile bride in a Bengali household withholding her intellectual ambition which she would have otherwise pursued as a student of Philosophy in Presidency College, Kolkata. She falls into the set paradigm of Bengali Hindu socio-cultural ideology. In this context it is relevant to discuss ideology and hegemony. Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, discusses Marx's theory of ideology that ideology by definition 'thrives *beneath* consciousness' (10). The ideological nature of society is camouflaged as normal cultural paradigm rooted in convention and common sense. Its frame of reference being the age old tradition makes its propagation effective. According to Louis Althusser (1969) cited by Hebdige:

. . . ideology has very little to do with 'consciousness'. . . It is profoundly *unconscious*. . . Ideology is indeed a system of representation, but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with 'consciousness': they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as *structures* that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their 'consciousness'. They are perceived-accepted suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men via a process that escapes them. (12)

Althusser is here referring to structures like the family, cultural and political institutions, etc. that impose themselves on individuals who fail to understand their relevance.

Patriarchal society symbolizes the system of representation of ideology that appreciates unquestioned obedience and silence in the majority. Gauri, after her marriage to Udayan leads an invisible life, silenced as the 'other' in his family. Udayan had gone against convention, not allowed his parents to choose his bride and married Gauri without any celebration in the Registrar's office. This was a blow to the

expectations of ideology that his parents unconsciously followed. She could never satisfy them and they blamed every failure on her. Udayan's violent death in the hands of the police, which was a consequence of his terrorist activities, was also related to her bad wifely guidance. Subhash, who has been away in America for a considerable period has distanced himself from the 'perceived-accepted-suffered' cultural norms and is shocked at the treatment Gauri receives and silently accepts in his household. He wants to meet Gauri and asks for her. His mother refusing to acknowledge Gauri's existence replies: "Who?" (Lahiri 92) and casually dismisses the cruel fact that she has been segregated from the family and eats by herself in the kitchen after the death of Udayan. Subhash expresses his desire to meet her and is told that she is resting as she is unwell and that there is no necessity of calling a doctor to see her.

Is she there now? I would like to meet her.

She's resting. She's not feeling well today.

Have you called a doctor?

His mother looked down, preoccupied with the food she was serving to the others.

There's no need for that. (92)

Later he finds her in the kitchen, sitting on the floor, her long hair pulled back above her neck, 'head down, wrists bare, dressed in a sari of crisp white' (94). She was eating a frugal meal of just dal and rice with a little salt to add taste to her it. She was deprived of coloured clothes, fish, meat and the goodies cooked in the house for the rest of the family was not given to her. 'If the houseboy was out on an errand, it was Gauri who served tea. But she never joined them. After helping his mother with the morning chores she kept to her own room ... He noticed that his parents did not talk to her; that they scarcely acknowledged her presence when she came into view'(95). Shocked by Gauri's predicament Subhash reacts to the situation and in turn, is told by his mother that "These are our

customs” (114). It may be noted that ‘Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes ‘succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range’ ... so that subordinate groups are, if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all ‘ideological’: which appears instead to be permanent and ‘natural’, to lie outside history, to be beyond particular interests’ (Hebdige 16). The myth of the ideal Bengali widow and her role in society defines and justifies the control exerted by Gauri’s mother-in-law on her. In his book *Mythologies*, Barthes explains that mythology is performative, in that, it naturalizes and normalizes meaning the hegemony uses to control others in order to dominate. Gauri sustains the myth by silently consenting to observe it. Pregnant with Udayan’s child, she feels that her life as a widow lacked perspective and eluded her grasp.

It was like a blind spot just over her shoulder. A hole in her vision. But the future was visible, unspooling incrementally.

She wanted to shut her eyes to it. She wished the days and months ahead of her would end. But the rest of her life continued to present itself, time ceaselessly proliferating. She was made to anticipate it against her will (Lahiri 111).

Gauri’s predicament triggers a desire in Subhash to war against customs and take her away to a better life in Rhode Island where he lived. He decides to marry her, to become a father to her child and learn to love her. He proposed marriage to her and offered her a utopia that she could never have conceived of. He told her that life for her in America would be utopic, where no one would question her past as they did not know about the Naxalite movement; that ‘no one would bother her. She could go on with her studies. It would be an opportunity to begin again... If she went with him to America, he promised her, it would all cease to matter’ (119). A chance to make her life meaningful makes Gauri accept Subhash’s proposal and marry him. Migrating to America would make her

forget her past, the pain of her husband being dragged and shot dead in front of her eyes and also the repressive familial situation widowhood had imposed upon her. 'She'd wanted to leave Tollygunge. To forget everything her life had been. And he had landed her the possibility' (127). Like Subhash she would have another life to go to, would, like him, have 'The ability to leave' (112) and live. Gauri decides to defy hegemony and carve out a new life and identity in the freedom offered in America. To be free 'in an atmosphere not their own' (125). Hebdige is of the opinion that 'Hegemony . . . is not universal and "given" to the continuing rule of a particular class. It has to be won, reproduced, sustained. Hegemony is, as Gramsci said, a "moving equilibrium" containing relations of forces favourable or unfavourable to this or that tendency' (16).

O'Reilly and Benson, in their book *Lifestyle Migration*, describe this situation and the desire of an individual to escape into a better life. According to them, 'Each and every one of these mobile individuals presents migration as a route to a better and more fulfilling way of life, especially in contrast to the one left behind. This way of life can be distinguished from that sought by other migrants, such as labour migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, in its emphasis on lifestyle choices specific to individuals of the developed world; migration for these migrants is often an antimodern, escapist, self-realization project, a search for the intangible 'good life'(2). Thus Gauri assumes the role of a lifestyle migrant and escapes from a society that posed a threat to her identity into one that offered her freedom, opportunity, scope to build an identity and an intangible 'good life'. In America, Subhash acknowledges her independence and encourages her to move about the university campus on her own and to use the library there; at the same time he reminds her that her priority should be her daughter. While he indulges her intellectual whims he expects her to play the role of a homemaker. Gauri tries to reconstitute the love she felt for her first husband in their daughter, Bela

and fails. 'Instead there was a growing numbness that inhibited her, that impaired her' (Lahiri 164). She feels alienated in her own home and escapes into her world of Philosophy classes at the university and the library and locks herself in her room, keeping herself busy in course work and writing her Dissertation. She is acutely aware of her shortcomings as both a wife and a mother, but chooses to continue on the path of intellectual pursuit because she is afraid that, 'she had already descended to a place where it was no longer possible to swim up to Bela, to hold on to her' (164). Feeling claustrophobic in her loveless second marriage, which she had undertaken in order to forget the pain of Udayan's death and to escape from her oppressed life in Kolkata, Gauri decides on a second exile. She confesses to her Professor Otto Weiss the reason for choosing to marry Subhash and coming to America: 'My first husband was killed, she said. I watched it happen. I married his brother, to get away' (166). Subhash's expectations and restrictions on her pose a threat to the identity she wanted to groove out for herself.

With the help of Professor Weiss she carefully plans her future, completes her PhD and gets a teaching job in California, literally on the West coast of America. For a second time she chooses exile and severance from family putting time and space between them, trying to obliterate their memory altogether as she seeks a more meaningful life in contrast to the one she was living in Rhode Island. Though she revolts and makes a choice to exile herself, yet her predicament is like any other exile. Edward Said in *Reflections on Exiles* says that,

Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as a part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology – designed to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole- is virtually unbearable,

virtually impossible in today's world ... Exile is sometimes better than staying behind or not getting out ... Because *nothing* is secure. Exile is a jealous state. What you achieve is precisely what you have no wish to share, and it is in the drawing of lines around you ... that the least attractive aspects of being in exile emerge... (177-178).

Gauri in her search for a new life and identity becomes a part of the 'triumphant ideology' that Said speaks about. She writes herself a new grammar of utopia as a lifestyle fugitive in California. She attempts to sever her links with her roots, her land, her past and her present family. She attempts to reconstitute her broken life in California, in the opposite end of America dreaming of a utopia where she would be essentially 'herself'. Her utopia, California is 'A place she knew would contain her, where she knew she would be conveniently lost' (Lahiri 232). To preserve her threatened identity she had chosen exile: 'She entered a new dimension, a place where fresh life was given to her. The three hours on her watch that separated her from Bela and Subhash were like a physical barrier, as massive as the mountains she'd flown over to get here. She had done it, the worst thing that she could think of doing'(232). As an exile she adapted to her new home and environment, which to her was 'both comforting and strange'(235). Like a refugee she was grateful and embraced its 'lack of winter, its paucity of rainfall', its aridity and 'blistering desert winds' (235). The narrative tells us that,

She'd met other refugees from the East Coast who had fled for their own reasons, who had slipped from their former skins, not knowing what they would find but compelled to make the journey. Like Gauri, they had tethered themselves to California, never going back. There were enough of these people that it ceased to matter where she was originally from, or what had brought her here. Instead at social gatherings, when required to make small talk, she was able to participate in that collective sense of discovery, of gratitude for the place' (235).

Gauri felt a sense of kinship with the other refugees because as exiles they wanted to forget their traumatic past and reconstitute a new life and a new history for themselves. Each of them, like Gauri, had structured their individual grammar of protest. Gauri's attitude was quite like James Joyce's, who had chosen to exile himself from Ireland 'to give force to his artistic vocation and always found some justification to fuel his antagonism towards his native land' (Said 182). Gauri to had found a scape goat, she 'convinced herself that Subhash was her rival, and that she was in competition with him for Bela, a competition that felt insulting, unjust' (Lahiri 232). Yet, like Joyce and all other exiles she could not effect a complete forgetting of her past.

Although, keeping away from the Indian Diaspora in California, isolating herself from people and severing contact with both family in Rhode Island and India Gauri motivated herself to forget her past. Her desire to remain anonymous and isolated was almost impossible as her new job expected her to oversee and mentor Indian students. She always had the fear that someone would question her about her past in India, her links with Udayan and the Naxalites and also question her about shirking her responsibilities as a mother and a wife. She was haunted by the fear that Subhash and Bela would materialize and demand her return: 'She used to fear that they would find her on the sunny campus, on one of the sidewalks that led from one building to another. Confronting her, exposing her. Apprehending her, the way the police had apprehended Udayan' (231). She wanted to live an anonymous life. She 'wanted California to swallow her; she had wanted to disappear' (233). As a defence against what she considered repression and bondage, she never allowed herself to remember what she had left behind. To Gauri, her past posed a threat to the identity she had meticulously constructed. Dalton and Huang discuss motivated forgetting as 'a psychological defense mechanism whereby people cope with threatening and

unwanted memories by suppressing them from consciousness. ... When forgetting is guided by deliberate and controlled processes, the to-be-forgotten memories intrude into consciousness' (1017). Gauri's forgetting for a better and meaningful life is a deliberate process controlled by her. Yet the past surfaces in her dreams. She dreams of Udayan as a young boy who does not care that she is married to his brother and makes love to her. The small round wooden table that she buys reminds her of 'the smell of the bedroom furniture she had left behind in Tollygunge'(Lahiri 242); of the bed 'on which she and Udayan had created Bela' (242). As years passed she remembered Subhash and Bela, and the kitchen tricks he had taught her. It follows that, 'Motivated forgetting does not imply true loss of unwanted material from memory; the material simply is not explicitly retrieved as a defensive response to threat. Accordingly, it remains implicitly accessible in the face of threat and can be explicitly retrieved if the threat is mitigated'. (Dalton and Huang, 1017). Years after her abandonment of her family in Rhode Island, Gauri's defences are down because she feels no threat to her identity anymore. She realizes that Subhash had never been a threat; rather he had risked his ties with his parents and assisted her in escaping from the repressions of the Indian patriarchal society. Subhash 'had done nothing wrong. He had let her go, never bothering her, never blaming her, at least to her face' (Lahiri 242). Yet, she justifies her self imposed exile; Subhash had rescued her from Tollygunge, he 'had brought her to America and then, like an animal briefly observed, briefly caged, released her'(242). Even Bela, after decades compromises with her mother's abandoning, tries to understand why her mother had severed links with Calcutta and India and never ever spoke about it, she understands that Gauri had gone away from them taking her unhappiness with her, that it was her necessity born out of circumstances.

Like every exile, Gauri's repugnance is strong. Her protest is exhibit in the fact that she has little to do with her native country and its customs. The feeling of being observed as a caged animal was strong enough to drive her from her responsibilities both in Tollygunge as well as in Rhode Island. After years of severing ties with her own people and living far away from them in California Gauri has matured enough to face the world she had shunned, the world from which she had exiled herself. The memory that she had so meticulously tried to bury had surfaced to haunt her. She felt guilty and shameful. 'The shame that had flooded her veins was permanent. She would never be free from that'(306). The bubble of utopia of individual good life burst when Gauri's made an assessment of her opportunities and losses that she has willfully incurred. She wanted to avoid a future of isolation that she foresaw and dreaded. Her search for a better way of life, which appears no different to that held by all migrants, is distinctive, reflecting her wider lifestyle choices as an intellectual. Isolation and loneliness become defining factors in her life and like most exiles or migrants her carefully forgotten memory is retrieved. Dalton and Huang suggest that 'motivated forgetting is more effective when it operates automatically than when it operates deliberately' (1018). Gauri's forgetting of her antecedents could not become a permanent feature and surfaced in the face of her aging and isolation. In search of a better life in an alien country and culture, she had adapted the escapist route pushing cognizable memory into far recesses. Deliberate forgetting neither gives her permanent amnesia or peace. Her encounter with Dipankar Biswas, a 'Bengali student of hers from many years ago' (Lahiri 278) and his desire to interview her about the Naxalite movement in India during the 1970s, on which he was doing a research, jars her memory and unsettles her. 'Her eyelid twitched. It was a nervous tic... She lifted her glass to her lips. She drank some water. She felt tiny cubes of ice, slipping down her throat before she could catch them' (278-279). She

became nervous that her past and guilt had come back to catch up with her. She refuses to be interviewed in spite of Dipankar's assurance that her identity would be protected. 'She was suddenly afraid that he knew something. That maybe her name was on a list. That an old file had been opened, an investigation of a long-ago occurrence under way' (279).

Her carefully constructed world and identity seem threatened. Her memory had deliberately obstructed the details of the Naxalite movement to which she had lost her happiness and her impressions were flickering. The names of Naxalite leaders like Kanu Sanyan and Charu Mazumdar were discussed but she feigned ignorance. After her meeting with Dipankar Gauri searches the internet for details about these people and ironically, desires to reconnect with her daughter and homeland, India. It is relevant here to bring in Locke's theory of self and memory. Piccirillo discusses Locke's theory and states that Locke

offers the argument that because in order to be a self, one must be a thinking thing, and that because "consciousness always accompanies thinking" ..., the self with which one personally identifies extends and persists only so far as one's consciousness. The consciousness Locke refers to can be equated with memory. This assumption is supported by Locke's assertion that, "as far as [a] consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now as it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done" (1).

Locke's theory indeed explains and applies to Gauri's behaviour and throws light on why she decides to break her self-inflicted exile and look for Bela and also reconnect with her brother, Manash, who lives in Kolkata. Gauri is a thinking person, an intellectual, thus her constructed self extends up to her deliberate forgetting or obliteration of memory. Her real self and identity extend beyond her constructed consciousness into

a past that she had meticulously blocked out of her thoughts and which was scratched open by Dipankar. The narrative tells us that her intellectual pursuit and passion take a backseat and she impulsively abandons her conference in London to buy a ticket to Kolkata. She wants to come to terms with a past that has haunted her all her life. She receives a culture shock as '[s]he was unprepared for the landscape to be so altered. For there to be no trace of that evening, forty autumns ago' (Lahiri 320). The situation and scenario at her parental house had also changed. Gauri could not situate herself in their lives; she stays in a guest house and at the end of the week returns to her isolation and chosen lifestyle.

Conclusion:

Lahiri's narrative in *The Lowland* tells us that space and time that had taken Gauri away from a homeland and a family was an inscription of a grammar of protest that describes her life. Yet, her experience (both past and present) that was real, defeats her purpose. She is pulled back by the trailing memory so deliberately blocked, into a nostalgia that probably would describe the migrants like Gauri, who leave their homeland to settle in alien countries primarily for a better life severing links with home and homeland. Gauri's defiance of patriarchal ideology, attempts to push back her past into oblivion and her self-induced exile towards self-fulfillment boomerangs on her at a matured stage in life where she comes to face an unending isolation. The carefully constructed utopia seems ruptured as she breaks the neat lines she had drawn around her and attempts to turn back towards the life she had abandoned both in Rhode Island and in India. Edward Said's words ring true that in absolute isolation 'the least attractive aspects of being in exile emerge' (Said 178) where lifestyle migrants like Gauri are cornered.

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